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ABSTRACT

Despite three decades of research on African American English (AAE), educational workshops aimed at improving the academic achievement, particularly the literacy achievement, of African American students still emphasize differences between Standard English and African American English. One result is that teachers may overlook the linguistic resources of their African American students. A challenge for the research community now is to investigate how features of African American English might be used instructionally. Several researchers have noted teachers' use of call-and-response--rapid verbal interaction between speaker and listener that has its origins in religious tradition--in classrooms composed of African American students. This digest presents a working definition of call-and-response, discusses relevant research on the use of this interactional strategy for instructional purposes, and presents examples from an ongoing study of elementary school classrooms to illustrate some of the fundamental, explanatory dimensions of this discourse pattern. (AA)

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Using Call-and-Response to Facilitate Language Mastery and Literacy Acquisition Among African American Students

MICHÉLE FOSTER

Despite three decades of research on African American English (AAE), educational workshops aimed at improving the academic achievement, particularly the literacy achievement, of African American students still emphasize differences between Standard English and African American English. One result is that teachers may overlook the linguistic resources of their African American students. A challenge for the research community now is to investigate how features of African American English might be used instructionally. Several researchers have noted teachers' use of call-and-response—rapid verbal interaction between speaker and listener that has its origins in religious tradition—in classrooms composed of African American students.

This digest presents a working definition of call-and-response, discusses relevant research on the use of this interactional strategy for instructional purposes, and presents examples from an ongoing study of elementary school classrooms to illustrate some of the fundamental, explanatory dimensions of this discourse pattern.

Call-and-Response

Smitherman (1977) defines call-and-response as "spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the statements ('calls') are punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener" (p. 104). She suggests that responses function to affirm or agree with the speaker, urge the speaker on, repeat what the speaker has said, complete the speaker's statement in response to a request from the speaker or in spontaneous talking with the speaker, or indicate extremely powerful affirmation of what the speaker has said.

Responses can follow from a speaker's specifically requesting them or eliciting them by manipulating their own discourse, or they can be unsolicited and spontaneously interjected into the ongoing interaction (Foster, 1989). Call-and-response is not limited to verbal interaction. It occurs also in other media produced by African Americans, such as music and dance.

My own definition of call-and-response draws on and extends Smitherman's: Call-and-response is a type of interaction between speaker and listener(s) in which the statements ("calls") are emphasized by expressions ("responses") from the listener(s), in which responses can be solicited or spontaneous, and in which either the calls or responses can be expressed linguistically, musically, verbally, nonverbally, or through dance.

An Example of Call-and-Response

In the following example of call-and-response, the teacher helps students connect familiar linguistic patterns to new ones by using familiar intonation patterns and varying them. To help a student having difficulty pronouncing the word *paleontologist*, the teacher uses familiar words (*Pay Leon*) to lead the student to the correct pronunciation of the unfamiliar *paleontologist*. She pronounces the unfamiliar word slowly, stressing each syllable, and confirms that the student knows the number of syllables in the word. Several times she calls for a response from the individual student; eventually, she calls for a group response.

(T=teacher; S=individual student; Ss=whole group of students)

T (call): How many sounds? How many sounds? How many sounds?

Ss (response): Six.

T (call): Six OK. We know that: *pa le on*. Say it.

S (response): *pa le on*

T (call): *pa le on*

S (response): *pa le on*

T (call): Say it again.

S (response): *pa le on, pa le un on pa*

T (call): You guys help him out.

Ss (group response): *pa le on*

T: You know like if you owe Leon some money. An you say, "I'm 'on pay Leon."

S: *Pay Leon.*

T: *Pay Leon.*

S: *Pay Leon.*

T: *Pay Leon,* everybody.

Ss: *Pay Leon.*

T: Softly.

Ss: *Pay Leon* (soft voices).

T: Softer.

Ss: *Pay Leon* (very soft voices).

T: Louder.

Ss: *Pay Leon* (loud voices).

T: (Snaps fingers and waves hand around in a circle to signal the students to say the phrase.)

Ss: *Pay Leon.*

T: (Snaps fingers and waves hand around in a circle to signal the students to say the phrase.)

Ss: *Pay Leon.*

T: (Snaps fingers and waves hand around in a circle to signal the students to say the phrase.)

Ss: *Pay Leon.*

T: OK. That's *paleon to lo gist.*

Ss: *to lo gist*

T: You can say that fast. Now say the whole thing.

S: *Paleontologist*

T: Hey boy. Give me five.

By manipulating stress patterns, the teacher transformed the first three syllables of this unfamiliar word into a familiar phrase. This triggered several call-and-response turns, some spoken softly, some loudly, and others rhythmically to hand claps and finger snaps, but each turn spoken so that the intonation, rhythm, and stress clearly conveyed the phrase's meaning. The teacher then modulated the intonational contour until it corresponded to the first syllables of the word *paleontologist*. The sequence ended with the student pronouncing the word correctly.

Relevant Research

Several studies have shown that call-and-response can be effective in teaching African American students. An early study that examined how African American English-speaking first graders were taught to read (Piestrup, 1973) found that students taught with African American discourse strategies, including call-and-response, achieved higher reading scores on standardized achievement tests

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and were better able to switch between African American English and Standard English according to context.

Foster (1989, 1995) analyzed the discourse of an African American teacher as she interacted with her class of predominantly African American students at a community college. The study focused on the teacher's discourse, particularly how—through repetition, repetition with variation, call-and-response, rhythm, variation in pace, and creative language—the teacher shifted her discourse style from a mainstream style of talk to an African American discourse style when she was teaching. The teacher deemed this indigenous interactive style to be appropriate and effective for classroom interaction. Enthusiastic engagement enabled students to better remember and retrieve information. This social experience served one of the most important functions of classroom discourse—building cognitive information—as well as establishing and maintaining social relationships and expressing the speakers' attitudes (Cazden, 1988).

Data Analysis

One hundred call-and-response sequences were recorded in a recent study involving primary grade classrooms in two schools located in predominantly African American and poor communities in the San Francisco Bay area. (The *Pay Leon* sequence is one of them. Other sequences will be provided here to further illustrate this discourse pattern.) Analysis suggests that call-and-response sequences vary along four dimensions—*code, function, initiator,* and *mode*. Call-and-response sequences can include items from more than one *code* (system of communication), for example, a verbal call and a musical response. They also vary according to their communicative *function*—expressing attitudes, expressing identities, and conveying cognitive information (Cazden, 1988). The *initiator* of call-and-response sequences in this study was typically the teacher, but students were permitted to and sometimes did initiate call-and-response. Call-and-response sequences also varied according to *mode*—the manner, way, or method in which they were performed (i.e., how scripted they were). Some call-and-response sequences appeared as highly scripted (i.e., well-rehearsed material performed repeatedly), but when the call-and-response sequences first emerged in these classrooms, they were often very creative. The teacher often invoked a call-and-response sequence to celebrate learning or commend someone for accomplishing a task. In these instances, call-and-response consisted of energetic but highly scripted routines. Two ritual-like routines were commonly used for this purpose. One took the form of a salute, "You get down baby!," chanted in unison by the class in response to the teacher's call, "What do we say?" Another consisted of two lines from a popular rhythm and blues song from the 1970s, *You Can Ring My Bell*, adapted for this purpose. The following example illustrates.

> Three boys enter the classroom; the one in the middle is being supported by a boy on either side. He is limping. The boys tell the teacher that there was an accident on the playground. The boy who is limping announces, "I'm injured." Addressing the class, the teacher smiles, "He said *injured* and not *hurt*. Bring him over here and let him ring the bell." Smiling, but still limping, the boy rings the rusty bell sitting on the desk in front of him. The pupils then sing one chorus of *You Can Ring My Bell*.

Analysis of this excerpt along the four dimensions—code, function, mode, and initiator—reveals that it consisted of a verbal call and a musical response; it expressed speakers' attitudes by celebrating learning (i.e., the student's use of the more sophisticated term injured); it was highly scripted or routinized; and it was initiated by the teacher. In other instances, particularly those where the function was non-cognitive, call-and-response sequences were initiated by students. When its purpose was cognitive, call-and-response was used to facilitate students' semantic development by increasing their awareness of letters, syllables, spelling, and word meanings. Thus, whether they were chanting the letters in words (*G-I-R-L, girl*) or syllables of words (*con-tain-er*), or calling out words that fit the meaning of dramatized sentences (Call: "You lost your coat. How do you feel? You have to go home and tell your mom you lost your coat. How do you feel?" Response: "Anxious.") students were becoming more adept at literate practice through call-and-response.

Interactions such as these and the one described earlier (*Pay Leon*) focus attention on language forms to help children cultivate the metalinguistic awareness that is critical for developing competence in reading and writing. In this example, phonemic awareness and vocabulary development—skills and abilities that recent studies have found to predict reading achievement in children—are enhanced. It is reasonable to hypothesize that the process can be hastened by culturally appropriate instruction using indigenous interactive routines, because students are developing their awareness within nested contexts of meaning, familiar linguistic routines, and language play.

Educational Implications

Cazden (1999, p. 39) asked, "What are useful roles for a secular classroom adaptation of this call-and-response discourse mode that derives originally from sacred tradition?" Without sustained classroom observation, the complexity and educational function of any interaction type, including call-and-response, may remain undetected. Several characteristics seem to distinguish the study described here from others reported previously. First, this analysis focuses on multiple uses of call-and-response and modes of communication. Attention is fixed on examples of call-and-response that are dynamic, timely, and authentic—all central tenets of sociocultural approaches to instruction (i.e., using what children already know and facilitating the integration of new information or skills into their existing knowledge structures). In this study, the teacher mediates between the children's everyday world—their linguistic and cultural worlds—and their curricular world by drawing on the social, cultural, and linguistic competence they bring to school to help them become skillful at handling new vocabulary.

Conclusion

It is not possible, based on the analysis of this study, to provide a definitive answer to the question of the specific role that call-and-response can play in helping African American students achieve the higher levels of literacy demanded in today's classrooms. Previous research, however, although limited, provides evidence of the positive effect that rhythm, recitation, and repetition can have on the learning, enthusiasm, motivation, and engagement of African American students. Further research is needed to determine the full effectiveness and appropriate pedagogical uses of the communicative practice of call-and-response.

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